A PRELUDE

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A PRELUDE

Francis Sherman

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A Prelude

Watching the tremulous flicker of the green
Against the open quiet of the sky,
I hear my ancient way-fellows convene

In the great wood behind me. Where I lie
They may not see me; for the grasses grow
As though no foot save June's had wandered by;

Yet I, who am well-hidden, surely know,
As I have waited them, they yearn for me
To lead them whither they are fain to go.

Weary as I, are they, O Time, of thee!
Yea, we, who once were glad only of Spring,
Gather about thy wall and would be free!

With wounded feet we cease from wandering,
And with vain hands beat idly at thy gate;
And thou,—thou hast no thought of opening,
And from thy peace are we still separate.

Yet, comrades, though ye come together there,
And search across the shadows for my face,
Until the pines murmur of your despair,

I think I shall not tell my hiding-place,
For ye know not the path ye would pursue,
And it is late our footsteps to retrace.

Too weak am I, and now not one of you—
So weary are ye of each ancient way—
Retaineth strength enough to seek a new;

And ye are blind—knowing not night from day;
Crying at noontime, "Let us see the sun!"

And with the even, "O for rest, we pray!"

O Blind and fearful! Shall I, who have won
At last this little portion of content,
Yield all to be with you again undone?

Because ye languish in your prisonment
Must I now hearken to your bitter cry?
Must I forego, as ye long since forewent,

My vision of the far-off open sky?
Nay! Earth hath much ungiven she yet may give;
And though to-day your laboring souls would die,
From earth my soul gaineth the strength to live.

O covering grasses! O Unchanging trees!
Is it not good to feel the odorous wind
Come down upon you with such harmonies

Only the giant hills can ever find?
O little leaves, are ye not glad to be?
Is not the sunlight fair, the shadow kind,

That falls at noon-time over you and me?
O gleam of birches lost among the firs,
Let your high treble chime in silverly

Across the half-imagined wind that stirs
A muffled organ-music from the pines!
Earth knows to-day that not one note of hers

Is minor. For, behold, the loud sun shines
Till the young maples are no longer gray,
And stronger grow their faint, uncertain lines

Each violet takes a deeper blue to-day,
And purpler swell the cones hung overhead,
Until the sound of their far feet who

About the wood, fades from me; and, instead,
I hear a robin singing—not as one
That calls unto his mate, uncomforted—
But as one sings a welcome to the sun.

Not among men, or near men-fashioned things,
In the old years found I this present ease,
Though I have known the fellowship of kings

And tarried long in splendid palaces.
The worship of vast peoples has been mine,
The homage of uncounted pageantries.

Sea-offerings, and fruits of field and vine
Have humble folk been proud to bring to me;
And woven cloths of wonderful design

Have lain untouched in far lands over-sea,
Till the rich traffickers beheld my sails.
Long caravans have toiled on wearily—

Harassed yet watchful of their costly bales—
Across wide sandy places, glad to bear
Strange oils and perfumes strained in Indian vales,

Great gleaming rubies torn from some queen's hair,
Yellow, long-hoarded coin and golded dust,
Deeming that I would find their offerings fair.

—O fairness quick to fade! Ashes and rust
And food for moths! O half-remembered things
Once altar-set!—I think when one is thrust

Far down in the under-world, where the worm clings
Close to the newly-dead, among the dead
Not one awakes to ask what gift she brings.

The color of her eyes, her hair outspread
In the moist wind that stifles ere it blows,

Falls on unwatching eyes; and no man knows
The gracious odors that her garments shed.

And she, unwearied yet and not grown wise,
Follows a little while her devious way
Across the twilight; where no voice replies

When her voice calls, bravely; and where to-day
Is even as yesterday and all days were.
Great houses loom up swiftly, out of the gray.

Knocking at last, the gradual echoes stir
The hangings of unhaunted passages;
Until she surely knows only for her

Has this House hoarded up its silences
Since the beginning of the early years,
And that this night her soul shall dwell at ease

And grow forgetful of its ancient fears
In some long-kept, unviolated room.
And so the quiet city no more hears
Her footsteps, and the streets their dust resume.

But what have I to do with her and death
Who hold these living grasses in my hands,—
With her who liveth not, yet sorroweth?

(For it shall chance, however close the bands
Of sleep be drawn about her, nevertheless
She must remember alway the old lands

She wandered in, and their old hollowness.)
—Awaiting here the strong word of the trees,
My soul leans over to the wind's caress,

One with the flowers; far off, it hears the sea's
Rumor of large, unmeasured things, and yet

It has no yearning to remix with these.

For the pines whisper, lest it may forget,
Of the near pool; and how the shadow lies
On it forever; and of its edges, set

With maiden-hair; and how, in guardian-wise,
The alder trees bend over, until one
Forgets the color of the unseen skies

And loses all remembrance of the sun.
No echo there of the sea's loss and pain;
Nor sound of little rivers, even, that run

Where with the wind the hollow reeds complain;
Nor the soft stir of marsh-waters, when dawn
Comes in with quiet covering of rain:

Only, all day, the shadow of peace upon
The pool's gray breast; and with the fall of even,
The noiseless gleam of scattered stars—withdrawn
From the unfathomed treasuries of heaven.

And as the sea has not the strength to win
Back to its love my soul, O Comrades, ye—
In the wood lost, and seeking me therein—

Are not less impotent than all the sea!
My soul at last its ultimate house hath won,
And in that house shall sleep along with me.

Yea, we shall slumber softly, out of the sun,
To day and night alike indifferent,
Aware and unaware if Time be done.

Yet ere I go, ere yet your faith be spent,
For our old love I pass Earth's message on:
"In me, why shouldst thou not find thy content?

"Are not my days surpassing fair, from dawn
To sunset, and my nights fulfilled with peace?
Shall not my strength remain when thou art gone

"The way of all blown dust? Shall Beauty cease
Upon my face because thy face grows gray?
Behold, thine hours, even now, fade and decrease,

"And thou hast got no wisdom; yet I say
This thing there is to learn ere thou must go:
Have no sad thoughts of me upon the way

"Thou takest home coming; for thy soul shall know
The old glad things and sorrowful its share
Until at last Time's legions overthrow
The House thy days have builded unaware."

Now therefore am I joyful who have heard
Earth's message plain to-day, and so I cry
Aloud to you, O Comrades, her last word,

That ye may be as wise and glad as I,
And the long grasses, and the broad green leaves
That beat against the far, unclouded sky:

Who worships me alway, who alway cleaves
Close unto me till his last call rings clear
Across the pathless wood,—his soul receives
My peace continually and shall not fear.

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CHRISTMAS M D CCC XCVII

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